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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the attitudes of African students of business English at a British university (University of Brighton, England) toward use of the Internet as an educational resource. Students were given an introduction to Internet use for research on individual projects, surveyed concerning their attitudes toward and initial experiences with the Internet, and surveyed again just before the end of the course. Questionnaires are included in the report. Results indicate the students generally felt their initial experiences with the Internet were positive and found an enormous amount of useful information. They were impressed at the information's quantity, quality, multiple sources, worldwide provenance, accuracy, timeliness, and relevance, and appreciated the ease and speed of access and the implied communication with others. Some frustration with slowness of response was found. The second questionnaire revealed that only a slightly higher percentage of students had found useful information, and two-thirds said they had found better information in the library. Nearly all respondents had discovered other interesting material on the Internet, and all expected to use it after they returned to their home country. All felt the Internet should be part of future courses. Based on these responses, a more structured and aggressive approach to Internet use is recommended. (MSE)

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ED 403 743

USING THE INTERNET ON A BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE

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The Ecole Supérieure de Commerce d'Abdijan (ESCA) is one of West Africa's leading business schools. Located in the Ivory Coast, where it is a major element in the new Houphouet-Boigny Polytechnic, its 4-year business studies courses attract students from all over the region. For several years, students about to enter its final year have attended a summer course in business English at the University of Brighton in Great Britain.

This summer course aims to achieve a swift and significant increase in the students' ability to operate effectively in an anglophone environment for business and social purposes.

Brighton University pays particular attention to helping its students make the most of the University's extensive IT resources. This year, Alison Dickens made sure they were aware of the video, audio and multimedia resources available in the Self-Access Centre, and Paul Tindell guided them in using the Centre's video cameras.

A mainstay of the course is an individual project focusing on a specific aspect of business in Britain, or indeed in Brighton, which each student researches and writes up. To aid the latter process, this year Paul Slater ensured they were able to use the Computer Centre's facilities for word processing, and Lili Wilson taught them how to access and use the Internet in an hour and a half session. Since the latter was an innovation, the present authors, the course tutors, decided to study the use the students made of the Internet and their reactions to it.

We used 2 questionnaires to investigate students' attitudes to using the Internet. We gave them the first questionnaire a few days after their introduction to the Internet, when their enthusiasm for it was palpable. We gave them the second questionnaire just before the course ended, largely to see how far their initial enthusiasm had persisted.

The First Questionnaire

The first questionnaire asked whether they had used the Internet to look for information relevant to their project topic and to their other studies, whether they had found anything useful, and

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whether they intended to use it in the future. It also asked them to list positive and negative features of the Internet.

22 of the 30 students on the course completed the first questionnaire. The questionnaire and its results are reproduced below.

INTERNET USE QUESTIONNAIRE

15.08.96

Please take a few minutes to complete the following questionnaire, which will help our research.

Have you used the Internet to look for material to help your project?

Yes: 22 No: 0

Have you found any suitable material on the Internet?

Yes: 14 No: 8

Do you intend to use the Internet to search for more material to help your project?

Yes: 21 No: 0

Have you looked for any material relevant to studies beyond your project?

Yes: 19 No: 3

If so, have you found any?

Yes: 16 No: 4

Do you intend to use the Internet to search for more material relevant to studies beyond your project?

Yes: 19 No: 1

What do you consider to be the most positive features of using the Internet?

<40 positive listings>

What do you consider to be the most negative features of using the Internet?

<20 negative listings>

Thank you very much for your help.

Discussion

It is clear these students found their initial contact with the Internet to be primarily a positive experience. They found an enormous amount of information that seemed relevant to their business studies in general, and often to their specific project.

By asking for both positive and negative points to be listed, we probably elicited more of each than if the questionnaire had simply asked whether there were positive or negative points (and if so, what they were).

The positive points referred overwhelmingly to the information available: its quantity, its quality, its multiple sources, its worldwide provenance, its accuracy, its up-to-dateness, its business relevance and its usefulness. Respondents also mentioned the ease and speed of accessing it, and the fact that it implied communication with others. Slowness was nevertheless the main negative factor cited, along with barriers to access such as the need for passwords, a certain information overload and distractions such as games.

The very quantity of potentially useful information, and the time needed to sift it, appeared in itself to be a barrier to effective use. Nevertheless, most students seemed rapidly to have acquired not only an ability to use the Internet fruiftfully but also the idea that it could and would serve them well in the future.

The Second Questionnaire

Towards the end of the course, we gave students a second questionnaire, to see whether this initial favourable response had kept up or whether the frustrations mentioned in some of their answers, combined with their current Internet use having served its purpose, had dulled their initial enthusiasm.

24 of the 30 completed the second questionnaire. It is reproduced below, together with the results.

INTERNET USE QUESTIONNAIRE: PART 2

10.09.96

Please take a few minutes to complete the following questionnaire, which will help our research.

PLEASE CIRCLE YOUR ANSWERS

1. Did you find any of the following on the Internet:

a) Material relevant to your project? Yes: 18 No: 6
b) Material relevant to your other studies? Yes: 21 No: 3
c) Material relevant to business in general? Yes: 23 No: 1
d) Other interesting, non-business material? Yes: 22 No: 2

2. Do you think you got better information through the Internet than from the Library? Yes: 8 No: 15

3. If you have Internet access in Abidjan, will you use it to get information:

a) To help your studies? Yes: 24 No: 0
b) To help your job and/or business? Yes: 24 No: 0
c) Of general interest to you? Yes: 24 No: 0

4. How adequate was the amount of guidance we gave you on using the Internet?

a) too much: 1 b) about right: 18 c) too little: 5

5. How adequate was the amount of guidance we gave you on using computers in general?

a) too much: 3 b) about right: 15 c) too little: 5

6. How helpful was it to have a language teacher on hand while you worked on the computer?

a) very helpful: 3 b) helpful: 9 c) not necessary:12 d) unhelpful: 0

7. Should we make Internet use a feature of future Brighton University courses for ESCA? Yes: 24 No: 0

8. Do you have any other comments? Please write them below.

***** Thank you very much for your help *****

Discussion

We knew from responses to the first questionnaire that everyone had looked for information relevant to their projects on the Internet. Two thirds had now found something, a proportion only slightly higher than we found in the first survey. Presumably, most of those who failed to find relevant material soon turned to other sources, such as the Library. Two thirds found better information in the University Library than on the Internet. One student added a useful comment: "Library gives more details and Internet provides more recent information".

Nearly everyone had found other interesting material, be it business-related or not, and related to their other studies or not. All of them intended to use the Internet back home, if they could secure access to it. Their Polytechnic has an Internet connection, but its use by students is restricted.

Most students felt that the relatively little guidance we gave them on using the Internet and using computers in general was about right. This reflects the quality of the introductions given by Lili Wilson and Paul Slater, respectively, and the fact that most of the students were reasonably computer literate to begin with. Nevertheless, some would have preferred more guidance, and a few could have done with less.

All those who answered felt that Internet use should be part of future courses.

The few comments in response to question 8 did not add significant information. Comments included "You don't need to be an expert in computer to use it", "The access speed to locations is still a bit slow", "Some information are not updated" and, simply "Thank you".

Conclusions

These students were quickly able to make fruitful use of the Internet. They were enthusiastic about it and, far from becoming disenchanted, they are unanimously convinced that it will serve them well as business students and business people in the future. Moreover, they are well aware that English is the primary language of the Internet.

Our rather "laissez-faire" approach, with a basic introduction and little subsequent guidance, was successful on this occasion.

Nevertheless, with the benefit of this experience, it will be tempting to take a more structured and more ambitous approach on future courses, for example by equipping students to "read between the lines" of companies' Web pages, most of which are promotional in nature. This would make Internet use more directly relevant to the language-improvement aims of our course, as well as to the project work.

We hope to hear how these students subsequently use the Internet, and we look forward to learning about similar experiments.